

Welcome to Lent! I don't know what your associations are with Lent or your feelings about it, but I think it'd be fair to have mixed feelings about a season that's typically seen as all about giving up something you enjoy... for 40 days (plus 6 Sundays!), right? On this first Sunday of Lent, we just heard the story about Jesus fasting and being tempted in the desert. Drawing inspiration from this story, Lent is an invitation to prepare for Easter by figuratively following Jesus into the wilderness. Trappist monk and contemplative teacher Thomas Keating put it like this: "Jesus went into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. The practice of Lent is a participation in Jesus' solitude, silence and privation." Lent as a **participation** in this particular experience of Jesus' life. That's the invitation. Which begs the question: how? And also maybe the question: why would we want to?

I'm aware that there are many things that can be said about Lent, but I am just going to say one thing. First, I believe that there's no way we can try to understand what's going on with Jesus in the desert without remembering that immediately before this he has taken an important step towards starting his public life and work by leaving home and heading to the Jordan river to be baptized by his cousin John. For three decades Jesus has been developing, learning and becoming as a person, with a growing sense of what he feels called to be, do and say in the world. But, true to our common human experience, he doesn't know or understand everything about what this means. After his baptism, I believe he still doesn't know or understand everything, but he has received from the Spirit the gift of knowing one thing. It seems fair to assume, then, that this one thing is a pretty essential thing for him to know in order to navigate all the unknowns and challenges ahead of him. In the gospel of Matthew just a few verses before the story we heard today, we read this about what he received: "Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

That is the one thing that he is given to know. His unshakeable identity as Beloved Son. His essential and unconditional Belovedness in relationship to a loving God. Before he begins to do or say any of what we might see as the real, meaty, significant stuff of his life, before he is in the public eye doing things that will bring him praise or criticism, approval or misunderstanding, he is given to know that he is secure in his connection with God, that he is fully and deeply loved and delighted in exactly as he is.

This is what we all most essentially need and long to know, isn't it? That we are fully and deeply loved and delighted in, just as we are. Of course there are plenty of other things we desire and need, or at least feel that we need. It seems to be part of the human condition to often get our wants and needs mixed up, and to often seek to meet our needs in futile or destructive ways. Thomas Keating, who I quoted earlier, used the term "emotional programs for happiness" or "false programs for happiness" to describe the ingrained, unconscious structures of belief and habit that drive us to pursue happiness or seek love where we will not ultimately find them, shaping a lot of how we typically live and behave. Last night as I drove into town for the Coldest Night of the Year walk, I realized with a start that I'd left my phone at home, and the faint panic and sense of disorientation at the thought of not having it with me for a couple of hours made me think that I should actually start calling it not my cell phone but my "mobile false program for happiness!" Of course it's just one of many such "programs" in my life, and most are a lot more subtle than my phone, having more to do with what I think I need to be, do or have, or what I "need" others to be or do! Keating saw our various "programs for happiness" falling into three main areas of instinctual need: security or survival, power or control, and esteem or affection. He overlays these three areas on Jesus' desert temptations like this: "Jesus was tempted to satisfy his bodily hunger by seeking security in magic rather than in God; to jump off the pinnacle of the temple in order to make a name for himself as a wonderworker; and to fall down and worship Satan in order to receive in exchange absolute power over the nations of the world. Security, esteem, power – these are the three classic areas where temptation works on our false programs for happiness."

In other words, just like all of us, Jesus was tempted to try to meet his needs in ways that not only would not satisfy, but that would inevitably be destructive for himself and others. That's what we see happening during

his 40 days in the wilderness. In dramatic, mythical terms, we see him wrestling the way we all do as humans. But instead of falling for the “false programs for happiness” that he is presented with, he sees through them and knows that they are not really what he needs or wants. Over and over again he remembers and returns to the Source of his true security, agency, and affection. So what was Jesus’ secret? Was it knowing the Bible better than Satan?! (Because it kind of comes across like a bit of a Bible knowledge battle at times, with Satan saying, “God says blah in the Bible so if you’re really the Son of God you should do this!” and Jesus being like, “Hmmm, no! The Bible actually says THIS so I’m not gonna!”) Or was Jesus just extremely psychologically strong, with willpower so robust that he could always resist temptation and “do the right thing?” No. The secret was that he had heard and believed and known that he was and would forever be the Beloved. We could even retell the whole story as the devil finding various insidious ways of saying, “If you are REALLY the Beloved, prove it!” and Jesus responding each time, “I don’t need to prove it. I am it.” That was his secret.

And Belovedness can, I believe, be our secret too. In a sense, we are already participating in the temptation part of Jesus’ desert experience day after day, moment by moment. Our entire lives could be viewed as one big wilderness, fraught with our own unique “false programs for happiness” that get us stuck in suffering – personally, relationally, collectively, globally, environmentally... WE could say, then, that the invitation of Lent is to move towards the FREEDOM part of Jesus’ desert experience, towards liberation from everything that traps, destroys, deceives, and divides us. And the key to this, the secret, is being the Beloved. This means that rather than focusing on how “sinful” we are or giving something up in an attempt to gain spiritual brownie points (cue false program for happiness!), the heart of the invitation of Lent is to come to know our Belovedness the way Jesus did, to receive it as a free gift that can never be earned or lost.

Each of us can find the unique things that help us to grow into knowing and embodying our Belovedness more deeply, and some of those might be practiced alone. It took me many, many years to concede, but I did eventually, that I need to start each day in a quiet solitude where I intentionally return again to God as the Ground of my Being, let myself be rooted into that Ground, and remember that I am God’s Beloved. From this ground I am more able to live in and from my Belovedness, less likely to get fooled and caught by my programs for happiness, hopefully able to see it sooner when I inevitably am, and more apt to see the Beloved in everyone I meet and treat them accordingly. This is the ongoing work of a lifetime, but work in which, thankfully, God seems to be very interested and invested too! It’s also work you and I do together. We need each other’s help to remember and embody our essential Belovedness. We can be Jesus with skin on for each other (Not that he didn’t have skin! It’s just all kinds of different skin now!); we can clearly and repeatedly remind each other in word and action: “You are the Beloved. You are loved and delighted in, just as you are.” We are mirrors of Belovedness for each other, and this is even true when we initially struggle to see someone else’s essential Belovedness. In struggling to and learning to perceive the Beloved in every person and every group, including those beyond our own groups, preferences, or understandings, we hope to grow together into a collective knowledge of a Belovedness that truly is essential, unearned, and complete – for me, for you, for us all. Until all are seen and treated as the Beloved of God, we aren’t there yet. We become the Beloved together, or what Martin Luther King Jr and others call the Beloved Community. Part of our shared work as Beloved Community is identifying and dismantling our false programs for happiness, because without each other’s help we just keep getting tricked by them as individuals, and in the systems we participate in, that lure us towards beliefs and actions that we think are for our benefit but which are in fact destroying us, others, and our planet.

So, this Lent, may we hear the call to continue to cooperate with God in the hard and beautiful work of growing into our essential Belovedness individually and communally. Whether or not we give up anything specific for Lent, may all we do be in the service of giving up the false programs for happiness that keep us from the fullness of joy, love and life that are our collective birthright. May Belovedness be the why and the how of our Lent. But most of all may it be our life’s great secret – a secret that belongs to everyone.